Like any profession, advancement has its terms of art: the ask, prospects, quiet phase. A relatively new one is culture of philanthropy. As in, “We need to build a culture of philanthropy at this institution.”

This sounds good, but ask for a definition, and you might get a long pause and a change of subject. Or worse, you’ll get the answer that the development folks should figure it out.

The general idea is that everyone from the campus CEO to the students understands that philanthropy is essential to the institution and is involved in some way—either through giving or facilitating the gifts of others. This vision is gaining traction, but it’s still nascent. Karen Osborne, president of the New York–based fundraising consultancy The Osborne Group, says that the culture of philanthropy is often viewed as just a nice thing to do.

“It’s a great thing for vice presidents to chitchat about,” Osborne says. But institutions that move beyond talking about this nebulous, feel-good concept and establish a thriving culture of philanthropy can dramatically improve their bottom lines. “My campaigns are going to be more successful, my fundraising is going to be more successful, my staff is going to be more motivated and therefore more successful because we’ve achieved this,” she says. “It’s worth doing.”

**VISUAL AID**

Having everyone on campus working to advance the institution has obvious benefits, but often when the term culture of philanthropy is used it relates to what a college lacks or how a university isn’t measuring up. Kevin Reeds, associate director of corporate and foundation relations at Saint Mary’s College of California, became interested in the concept because at the three campuses where he’s worked, he has only ever heard it spoken about in a “No, not us” way.

“People would say things like, ’Our culture of philanthropy won’t support that.’ Or ’We don’t have the depth of the culture of philanthropy to get our donors to do that.’ And never did I hear, or have I heard, anything positive about the culture of philanthropy.”

Reeds is writing his dissertation on the topic for his doctorate of education. When he started his research, he found few definitions of the term, although he pulled together a description from a 2008 report on philanthropy from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation: A culture of philanthropy brings people...
together to foster a shared responsibility for the quality of life in our community and sets about transforming an institution’s culture from the inside out.

Osborne’s definition: “Every constituency understands, embraces, believes in, and acts on his or her collective and individual roles and responsibilities in philanthropy in a collaborative and donor-focused manner.” What this looks like, she says, depends on an institution’s vision. Ask the following: What would the institution look like if this culture was achieved? What would be the benefits and the outcomes? What would be the board’s responsibilities? What would the leader, chief academic officer, deans, and chief financial officer be doing?

“If someone says, ‘We have a culture of philanthropy because we have 100 percent faculty and staff giving,’ I’d say, ‘That’s great, but where is your definition?’” says Osborne. “Where is your plan? How does this [faculty giving rate] stack up against it?”

Building this culture is not just development or advancement’s job. It’s unachievable that way.

It’s tempting for leaders to think, “We’ll hire these development officers, and they’ll be rainmakers and the rest of us can avoid having to talk to people about money,” says Craig Smith, associate vice president for development at Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. “That is a crucial misunderstanding that leads to limited success.”

Marina Pedreira-Vilarino, director of development and alumni relations at the University of Sussex in the U.K., makes clear that Sussex is in the beginning stages of this process. In her almost 13 years of building the university’s development operation, however, she has seen changes in how different members of the campus community think about philanthropy and their role in it. “It’s a collective effort, and [internal stakeholders] want to be a part of it. Their giving contributes to the success of the institution; it’s almost a responsibility to give, not because they have to but because they want to.” When she started, only a few of the university’s senior leaders gave to the institution, but now most of them do.

Campus leaders championing this culture should talk about the importance of philanthropy widely and often, says Maryann LaCroix Lindberg, vice president for advancement at New Hampshire’s Keene State College. “You really have to embed it all the way through the academic programs, student affairs, residential life. Everything has to have something related to leading people toward that culture of philanthropy.”

HOW DO YOU BUILD IT?

Every institution will build this culture in a slightly different way, depending on the advancement structure it already has in place, its strategic plan, and its leadership. Here’s some advice from those actively working to get every member of their campus community on board.

Start with your philanthropic strength. An institution needn’t have a long history of philanthropy to build this culture, but internal and external constituencies should have a base-level understanding of what philanthropy looks and feels like. Advancement officers should take an institution’s philanthropic strength—a robust student community service program, strong

CURRENTS asked two leaders—a marketing expert who says that to change a culture, you need to spark a movement, and a corporate culture change expert who’s helped companies improve their bottom lines—how they would build a culture of philanthropy at an educational institution.

Scott Goodson is the founder and CEO of StrawberryFrog, a cultural movement marketing agency, and the author of Uprising: How to Build a Brand—and Change the World—By Sparking Cultural Movements. His company developed the Driver Seat game for Liberty Mutual, the “World Wise” ad campaign for Morgan Stanley, and an e-commerce site for Natura Brasil.

How do you start a movement about something that a good number of people are going to fear?
You need an idea that is relevant to a lot of people. And the idea has to be bigger than the economic success for an organization. [For an education institution,] it could be international understanding. We as an institution want to attract international students and want to demonstrate international understanding. If that’s your movement, you need to align everyone in the organization to get behind it.

Who needs to be on board? You need to have the faculty involved and engaged. I don’t know what percentage [of institutional constituents] you need, but you certainly have to have the most opinionated and influential people with you, and with the faculty, that tends to be almost everybody.

What is a common mistake that people make in changing a culture? They go to the general population before they anchor it internally. A movement needs to start on the inside. That means orienting people, educating them, having them participate in forums. The top-down approach doesn’t work anymore. You need to bring people along with you.

What else is important in the process of changing culture? In today’s world, the use of social media is a great tool. It’s a good litmus test as well. If your idea isn’t something that people can get passionate about when you put it out in the social world, even among your own community, it’s probably not a big enough idea. If it’s average, it’s not going to work. The idea has to create a psychological earthquake. If it’s not good enough, you’ll only have the professional fundraisers involved.
Randy Ottinger is an executive vice president for Kotter International, an organizational change consultancy that works with leaders at large corporations and organizations, including Berkshire Partners, General Dynamics, and the Society for Human Resource Management, to help them become the best in their industries.

**What’s the best starting point for changing an organization’s culture?** What is essential is creating urgency. It starts with the senior leaders. Without agreement at that level, it becomes very, very hard. Organizations [usually] try to mandate [a change], use a project-management approach, have it be top-down, and do it in the same structure. A framework by which you make [change] happen becomes very critical, and that process needs to start with urgency.

**How do you get people on board with something they might fear, like raising money?** [People] need to be able to see their part in it. We recommend identifying an urgency team [made up] of people who already believe this and represent different constituents in the university and can [present] the message in a way that makes it real for people. Some people will never come on board though, and the best thing you can do is support the converted.

**What are the biggest stumbling blocks to culture change?** That people don’t do this urgency process upfront. The second one is trying to make change in the same structure you’ve been operating in. We believe that you need to create employee-led teams [to accelerate this work]. They identify initiatives that can break down the barriers that prevent change from happening. It’s very hard to change culture top-down. It’s much better to have a grassroots organization going back to the administration.

**Can you give an example of an organization that has successfully changed its culture?** The person who headed the supply chain at Coty Cosmetics said, “We have made acquisitions, we have global suppliers, but we’re not as efficient as we could be, and we want to take costs out of our system and get product to market quicker.” They went through the process of creating urgency, created an urgency team, identified a group of people to lead employee … teams, and brought in volunteers who were urgent. Within the first year, they [saved] $34 million.—GB

community involvement, or a particularly engaged subset of the alumni population—and build the culture from there.

“It’s hard to create a culture of philanthropy when the people you are trying to involve and engage have not themselves experienced the joy of giving and great stewardship,” says Osborne. “How can I deliver great stewardship if I’ve never received it?”

When Lindberg came to Keene State four years ago to create the college’s first advancement division, she was delighted to learn that the institution’s history would work in her favor: In the early 1900s, the city of Keene raised money to lobby the state to create a college there. “Right off the bat, the community was invested in the success of the institution,” Lindberg says.

The community is a primary focus of Keene State’s culture of philanthropy in a way that might not work at another institution. The college, in partnership with other institutions in the area, raised money to create a regional center for advanced manufacturing to train local workers for area employers. “As we look at philanthropy, it’s not just bringing in money for our students and within the walls of the institution. It … will also help regional employers and the community at large,” says Lindberg.

Jim McNamara, executive director of the development and alumni department at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, has also been building a development operation at his institution. While giving to higher education isn’t an ingrained practice in South Africa, giving in general is. “South African people have long been extremely generous to others who are in need. That has usually been done in the neighborhoods, the church, or the village. Part of our challenge is to translate that general feeling of being generous and helpful to an institutional setting.”

He’s already seen it happen in a grassroots way. Black students weren’t admitted to UCT in sizable numbers until the 1980s, and as a result of apartheid, those students had a tough time, McNamara says. “It was a siege mentality against the government; [the students] weren’t always sure that the university was ready to stand up to the government of the day to protect their right to be here,” he says. Now the institution is majority black, and many of the students need financial aid to attend.

A few years ago, a group of successful black graduates from the 1980s decided that even though their memories of their time at UCT weren’t always pleasant, they wanted to be involved in the alumni association. “They are not only in leadership positions of various kinds [at the university and in the alumni association], but they almost immediately started
built on its philanthropic history with record donations. “As a result, the institution has plaques around campus that serve as a “tangible indication of what generosity can achieve.” As a result, the institution has plaques around campus that serve as a “tangible indication of what generosity can achieve.”

CREATE THE RIGHT CONDITIONS. About half of U.S. development directors expect to quit within two years, many of them frustrated that their nonprofits’ organizational cultures don’t support fundraising. That’s according to Underdeveloped: A National Study of Challenges Facing Nonprofit Fundraising, a recent survey of 2,700 nonprofit executive directors and development chiefs (bit.ly/UnderDeveloped). Development directors reveal that their organizations lack a basic understanding of fund development. Among other changes, the report recommends that nonprofit leaders adjust their attitudes toward philanthropy. “A culture of philanthropy has little chance of taking hold when people think asking for money is distasteful or just hate doing it.”

The report from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the More Partnership (bit.ly/UK_Philanthropy). The report highlights the University of Sheffield for displaying donor plaques around campus that serve as a “tangible indication of what generosity can achieve.” As a result, the institution has built on its philanthropic history with record donations.

**THE WAY IT IS.** If you want to create a culture of philanthropy at your institution, first assess what kind of culture already exists, writes Gary Cole of Pursuant Consulting in the white paper “Rethinking a Culture of Philanthropy: Key Concepts to Assess an Organization’s Culture.” Culture refers to the attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and values of an organization. Do leaders view philanthropy as a means of filling budget gaps or for fulfilling the mission? “A culture of philanthropy is not a program to be created but acknowledgment of and adherence to a set of shared values.” Read more at bit.ly/Culture-Paper.

**HISTORY LESSON.** An analysis of U.K. universities notes remarkable progress in the number that are raising funds and the amounts they are generating. To keep momentum going, institutions should make a concerted effort to build a culture of philanthropy. “It should be an inevitable part of what students and staff experience in their university years,” says the report from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the More Partnership (bit.ly/UK_Philanthropy). The report highlights the University of Sheffield for displaying donor plaques around campus that serve as a “tangible indication of what generosity can achieve.” As a result, the institution has built on its philanthropic history with record donations.

**EPIC FAIL.** Change—especially culture change—is hard, but why? Efforts to change corporate cultures are rarely successful because companies grow impatient with the lengthy process, says retired business professor John P. Kotter. In “Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail” in the Harvard Business Review, Kotter examines eight steps for transforming an organization and how skipping or shortchanging steps results in failure. The first of Kotter’s steps is to create a sense of urgency that something has to change. Change requires cooperation, and failure to motivate people to help can doom your effort. Read more at bit.ly/HBR-Fail.

**MAKE SURE YOUR CAMPUS LEADER IS ON BOARD.** Grassroots can help create or nurture a culture of philanthropy, but leadership from the top is essential. The former Keene State president who hired Lindberg was so dedicated to building philanthropic involvement across the institution that she reallocated money to advancement and held campuswide forums twice a year to discuss the importance of engaging donors to raise funds and develop partnerships.

“You have to have the president completely behind it and not just give it lip service,” says Lindberg. In terms of importance, support from the institution’s leader is “probably one, two, and three.”

At RIT, the president leads by example. “Our president, with his wife, gives a tremendously large gift every year to RIT, and he’s quite public about it,” says Smith. “There needs to be plenty of talk about why it matters to give that money and why others should join you. We expect trustees to be good donors, but I think there’s a lack of expectation about leaders needing to do the same. They do.”

**ENGAGE SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY IN THE PROCESS.** The rest of the senior management team—board members, the CFO, the chief academic officer, vice presidents, and deans—should also work with advancement to build this culture. A productive relationship between key administrators and advancement leaders goes beyond the occasional chat over coffee, says Adrian Beney, a partner at the U.K.-based consultancy More Partnership. Senior leaders should seek the advice and wisdom of advancement officers.

Members of the faculty are also critical components in creating a philanthropic culture. They are the bridge between donors and students and alumni. “There’s nothing more inspiring than for a donor to see [academics] talking passionately and knowledgeably about their area of work,” says Pedroira-Vilarino, who has been so successful in helping faculty members raise money for their work that they now approach her to help.

Shortly after Smith came to RIT five years ago, his boss spoke with the provost about how they could encourage the nine deans to work collaboratively with development. The provost now asks the deans to track their donor calls, visits, and solicitations. Smith provides the provost with quarterly reports on each dean, and the provost then reviews the data with the deans.

Faculty members and administrators assume that when you start talking about development, you want them to ask people for money without providing them with support or education on how to do that, Smith says. He tells faculty members that unless they want to make an ask, he won’t require them to do so. He emphasizes the need for them to engage with donors and prospects to educate them about their work and their needs. “Donors want to talk to faculty and deans; they tolerate development officers.”
The University of California Davis Health System engaged CCS to assess their development operations and provide strategic direction and in-resident management of the development department. CCS worked closely with health system executive leadership and development staff to enhance the foundational elements of a successful fundraising program that will support the vision of philanthropy, providing a margin of excellence to accelerate innovation and distinction at the organization. CCS also developed a tailored CCS Learning Program that included philanthropy sessions presented to leaders throughout the Health System and an intensive Fundraising Academy for Health Sciences Development and other leaders aspiring to learn more about fundraising.

Let CCS help you surpass your advancement goals.
800.223.6733 | www.ccsfundraising.com | info@ccsfundraising.com
While UCT’s McNamara hasn’t given his four deputy vice chancellors or deans goals, he or one of his senior managers meets quarterly with each dean to hear about his or her priorities and discuss how the development office can help. For example, a senior academic might need funding for a good project and wants McNamara’s department to step in.

Beney notes that in this context, a little jealousy doesn’t hurt. “You’ll always get some entrepreneurial academics who get the idea that having some decent-sized gifts coming into their department would be very helpful, so they go out and do it. Some of the others start going, ‘Why has he got so many research students? Ahhh … he did some work with the development office. Maybe we should talk to them.’”

Don’t forget staff and students. At California’s Harvard-Westlake School, Senior Advancement Officer Jim Pattison has found that assisting campus colleagues in nonadvancement ways helps them understand what he and his staff do for the school. Harvard-Westlake annually holds a student film festival in Hollywood that attracts several hundred people. “It’s a major undertaking,” says Pattison. “Because we have expertise in event registration and handling catering, we told the [audiovisual] department that we are more than happy to do this part of it so that they can concentrate on dealing with the student filmmakers and putting the movies on the screen.”

This has helped change attitudes and has made internal stakeholders more receptive to development, Pattison says. “Providing those things helps people understand that we aren’t just people who like to throw parties and live in the cash shack.”

Students are another large part of the cultural equation. Osborne points out that the capacity for educational institutions to promote this culture with students is already there. “All of our institutions teach service—you should go out and help—but we never say, ‘and give.’ Philanthropy is a beautiful thing, an amazing, transformative thing, for both the giver and receiver. Shouldn’t we be teaching our children this?”

Set people up for success. It’s hard for volunteers to champion philanthropy effectively if they haven’t had good experiences. Osborne suggests making a champion’s initial foray into fundraising a sure success. She once took a board member on a donor visit, and “I knew that this donor was going to say yes. Lots of times we say to our volunteers, ‘We’ve tried, and tried, and tried, and it didn’t work, so will you do it?’ Oh, great. You had the phone slammed down three times, and you want me to call? We have to give people joyful experiences.”

Osborne also suggests introducing people to development by assigning them stewardship calls or visits. Making a donor feel good by thanking her out of the blue or explaining how her gift is helping 15 students graduate is a powerful introduction to fundraising for these philanthropic partners.

When Sussex’s Pedreira-Vilarino has a fundraising success, she shares it with all involved and ensures that her vice chancellor knows about everyone’s role. “When I report to my VC, I always acknowledge the members of the faculty and those colleagues in the administration that had input into securing that gift. This is not just a development office success.”

ONE STITCH AT A TIME

Building this culture is a long-term process that will likely involve many years of educating key stakeholders on its benefits. “It’s easy for people who are involved in individual activities to lose sight of the bigger picture,” says UCT’s McNamara. “Where does this activity fit in to what we’re trying to do? Some of our deans might have a short-term view that we’re going to build a new building for … [my school or college], so let’s get going with the fundraising for it. We have to caution them that this needs to be seen within the larger context of the long-term development program.”

Measuring success—increases in giving, faculty involvement, prospects, or stewardship activities—year over year and every five years will ensure progress toward the goal, says Reeds from Saint Mary’s. “What have we done to make it easier to fundraise on our campus?”

All of this can feel daunting to fundraisers under constant pressure to close, close, close. “This culture of philanthropy can feel very much like a frill,” Osborne says. “Who has time for this? It actually gives them time. Because now they have all these helpers.”

Gayle Bennett is a freelance writer and a former editor at CURRENTS.